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ABSTRACT

To determine if purposes in reading differ with sex, grade level, and nationality, a 16-item "Functions of Reading Scale" (developed from content analysis of student essays on why they like to read) was administered to 459 Irish (Dublin, Ireland) and American (Windham, Connecticut) students in grades three, five, and eight. Data analysis, revealing three main reasons for reading--enjoyment, utility, and escape--also showed several interesting trends: (1) girls read more for enjoyment while boys read for utilitarian purposes, (2) students in fifth grade had the highest enjoyment scores and those in third had the highest overall scores in utility and escapism, and (3) Irish students read more often for enjoyment and utility and less often for escapist reasons than did Americans. While limited by a small and possibly not representative sample, the research nevertheless indicated the usefulness of the "uses and gratification" approach of mass communication research, which assumes that subjects actively pursue communication materials on the basis of predetermined needs. (MM)

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Exploring the Functions of Reading: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Exploring the nature of children's interests in reading has been a major topic of research over the past fifty years Jenkinson, 1940; Robinson and Weintraub, 1973; Scott, 1947; Terman and Lima, 1925). Studies of reading interests have approached the issue from a number of methodological strategies: questionnaires, indepth interviews, Q-sort instruments, semantic differential measures, and daily diaries. Despite the variety of techniques used to collect and analyze the data, certain consistent patterns of interests have been recorded: boys generally prefer subjects dealing with adventure, mystery, sports, and science fiction containing action; girls enjoy romance, humor, and family-oriented stories (Greaney, 1983; Huus, 1979; Witty, 1961).

But do children seek reading materials strictly on the basis of their interests? Perhaps not. We know, for example, that people tend to read what others are reading--the best sellers of the day, the most discussed authors, the currently popular issues. Waples (1932), in a study of adult readers, found no relationship between readers' subjects of interest and the subjects about which they read. Rather, he concluded, a constellation of factors conditioned the reader's selection and interpretation of a particular publication. Among these factors are such broad traits as age, gender, income, loyalties, values and motives for reading.

Mass communications research has developed a relatively new methodological strategy known as the 'uses and gratifications' approach, which attempts to study the relationship between personal characteristics and mass media behavior. The individual in this approach is seen as an active participant, possessing certain needs and consciously selecting the communications options most likely to fulfill those functions. Investigations of this kind are based on the assumption that the individual by his/her use of the media, obtains a reward in terms of need gratification (Blumler, 1979).

From this perspective, the important question becomes: what needs are being met when a child reads? The emphasis is less on the specific content read than on the child's use of it in terms of need fulfillment. Children are considered selective; they choose content on the basis of functions served by it and the availability of functional alternatives. These functions are determined by the individual's needs which are, in turn, dependent upon psychological factors (gender, I.Q., age) and social factors (home environment, relationships with friends, and leisure time activities) (von Feilitzen, 1976).

The uses and gratifications model offers an advantage over other approaches in that it assumes that the total situation plays a role in determining the selection of materials. Since the needs of the individual are shaped by psychological and

social characteristics, many separate explanatory factors such as personality and motivation are thus taken into account.

With these considerations in mind, the current project was designed to explore the functions of reading for students in grades 3,5, and 8 in Ireland and the United States. Using the 'uses and gratifications' approach, the study attempted to investigate why children read and what needs it may satisfy. The specific research questions were: Do the same functions or reasons for reading operate both in Ireland and in the United States? If they do, then, to what extent are reading functions differentiated according to (a) gender, (b) grade level, and (c) nationality?

Sample

The study was conducted in June, 1982 in Dublin, Ireland and Windham, Connecticut. Details of the sample are summarized in Table 1. The fathers of most of the Irish pupils were

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Insert Table 1 about here

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engaged in skilled or intermediate professional occupations. Third and fifth grades attended the same school while eighth graders were enrolled in two nearby schools. The American sample, located in a rural area, included pupils whose parents were employed in a variety of business and industrial concerns.

Third graders from the local elementary school, fifth and eighth graders from the middle school were requested to participate in the study . The total sample included 459 students.

Procedure

In a pilot study (Neuman, 1980), over 300 Connecticut students in grades 3-9 were requested to write an essay on the theme "Why I like to read". A similar pilot study was carried out in Dublin. This prior work was undertaken to determine in an open-ended format children's language in describing their purposes for reading and to gain some advanced impression of the functions of reading that might emerge. A content analysis of the essays helped to identify a series of statements which described children's purposes for reading. These statements served as the basis for a four-point Likert type attitude scale. Following pretesting both in Connecticut and in Dublin (Greaney, 1982), the scale was modified slightly into a sixteen item "Functions of Reading Scale". The scale was administered to all students in a classroom group setting using the same directions and procedures in Ireland and the United States. Each item was read aloud by the classroom teacher. In response to each statement (e.g., I read because it will help me later with my school subjects), students were asked to indicate whether they agreed with it 'a lot', 'a little', 'not much', or 'not at all'. Students were informed that the information would not be

read or graded by the teacher.

Results

Separate factor analyses of the Irish and the U.S. data were carried out to determine both the number and the underlying functions of reading given by pupils in both cultures. Three distinctive factors were identified in each instance. The sets of factors were comparable. A high degree of similarity between factor solutions was found. The index of factor similarity, i.e., the coefficient of congruence (Mulaik, 1972) was .95 for the first factors in each set and .93 and .91 for the second and third pairs respectively. Given this degree of similarity, it was considered reasonable to pool the data from both countries. The results of the factor analysis of the pooled data are summarized in Table 2. Three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 were selected.

Insert Table 2 about here

An examination of the factor loadings suggests that the first factor may be termed reading for enjoyment. A student rated highly on this factor generally considers reading enjoyable, exciting, and interesting. The factor describes the student's personal responses to reading material; it is intrinsic in nature.

Factor 2, on the other hand, reflects extrinsic rewards for

reading. It refers to utilitarian functions such as school success and helpfulness in achieving life-long goals. Students receiving high scores on this factor regard reading as useful in school-related activities and later vocational success. In addition, these students judge reading as useful because their parents consider it important.

Factor 3 describes an escapist reason for reading. Students who rated highly on this factor most likely read when there is nothing to do, to pass the time, or to distract themselves from personal worries and concerns.

Together, the factors accounted for 50.3% of the item variance. These same three factors emerged in separate analyses for each of the third, fifth, and eighth grade levels. The coefficients (alpha) of internal consistency (loadings .4+) were .78, .77, and .69 for the enjoyment, utilitarian, and escapist functions respectively.

To examine differences in the functions of reading by gender, grade level, and nationality, factor scores (enjoyment, utility, and escapist scores) were computed for each student. Statistical analyses (2x2x3 factorial design) were carried out. The results for the main effects are presented in Figure 1. (A separate analysis in which the numbers in the three largest cells in Table 1 were reduced to approximately 30 produced vitually the same result.)

Insert Figure 1 about here

Several interesting patterns emerged in the analysis. Significant differences were recorded for gender on two factor scores. Girls scored higher than boys on reading for enjoyment, whereas boys appeared to read more than girls for utilitarian purposes. No significant differences were found for gender on the escapist factor.

Distinct grade differences in the functions of reading were also recorded. Fifth graders read for enjoyment to a greater extent than third or eighth graders. Third graders clearly regarded reading as a utilitarian activity to a much greater extent than students in the other two grades. Third graders also preferred to read materials of an escapist or diversionary nature than pupils at the other grade levels.

Comparisons between the Irish and the U.S. samples indicated several differences between the two cultures. Students in Ireland tended to read more for enjoyment than students in the U.S. A closer examination of the data indicated that this pattern was apparent at each grade level but was most pronounced at the eighth grade. Similarly, Irish students scored significantly higher overall on the utilitarian factor; these differences were due largely to the low scores of the eighth

grade U.S. students. The trend was reversed, however, in the case of the escapist function. Overall differences were recorded indicating that the U.S. students read more for escapist purposes than the Irish youngsters, particularly at the eighth grade level.

Conclusions

The major focus of this exploratory research was an analysis of the functions of reading. Our purpose was to determine if certain functions were common among students at different age/grade levels and if the functions were similar in Ireland and the United States.

At the outset it should be stressed that the results of this study should be interpreted cautiously since the samples used were small and the students were not randomly selected in either Ireland or the U.S. Despite these limitations, the patterns of relationships between the variables in the Functions of Reading Scale were consistent across cultures and grade levels. The findings are interesting enough to warrant further research.

The analysis identified three distinct reasons for reading: enjoyment, utility, and escape. Reading for enjoyment, exemplified by such statements as "It is exciting," refers to the intrinsic pleasures of reading for its own sake. Reading for utility, reflected by statements such as "It will help me with later school subjects", relates to the usefulness of reading for school and vocational success. Reading for escape, represented

by statements such as "I read because there's nothing else to do", refers to reading for purposes of diversion. These functions operated in both the Irish and U.S. samples, as well as at each grade level.

Recent studies by Lewis and Teale have reported similar dimensions with pupils in Australia. 'Secondary students attitudes toward reading were found to be multidimensional in nature, reflecting constructs of enjoyment, utility, and individual development (1980). Replicating the study with fourth and sixth grade youngsters, the investigators found that pupils consistently discriminated between valuing the usefulness of reading and enjoying it (1982). Gorman et. al., as well, in a study of eleven year old British pupils, reported similar functions of reading: pleasure, self-improvement, and activity to fill the time (1981).

What was of particular interest in our study was how these functions varied according to gender, grade level, and nationality. We found that compared to boys, girls were more likely to read for enjoyment, whereas boys were more likely than girls to read for utilitarian purposes. Evidence from a recent review supports these findings: girls claim to like reading more than boys and boys tend to be more interested in informational material (Greaney, 1983).

An analysis of the functions of reading by grade level indicated that the fifth graders in the sample scored highest on the enjoyment factor. This grade level roughly corresponds to the age which Terman and Lima term the 'reading craze' (1925).

Whitehead et. al., as well, found that nearly half of the 3000 ten year olds sampled in their study read over three books per month (1977). Greaney, in a recent study, reported that the pupils who regarded reading primarily for enjoyment tended to devote more time to leisure reading than those reading for other purposes (1982).

Third graders scored considerably higher than both the fifth and eighth graders on the utilitarian factor. To some extent, these differences might reflect a willingness on the part of young children to respond to adult expectations. In addition, the items might have been somewhat biased against older age groups (i.e. I read because my parent think it's important). The results are still rather striking, however, in view of the increasing demands for reading at the upper grade levels. This pattern might indicate a relatively narrow view of reading as a skill to be mastered; one that disregards the concept of reading as a continuum of skills which are increasingly refined and adapted for different purposes and types of materials. It might also reflect the lack of emphasis on reading in the content area.

Third graders read for escapist purposes more than the other students in the sample. This result however, was attributable to the large differences among the Irish third, fifth,

and eighth grade youngsters. These differences might be a function of the amount of time available for reading. Eighth graders might have relatively little opportunity to read due to the increasing demands of school, the pressures of national examinations, as well as the onset of more organized activities.

Students in Ireland tended to read for enjoyment and utility more than their U.S. counterparts. This trend was reversed, however, in the case of the escapist function. Here, the U.S. students read more for purposes of 'getting their minds off things' and "making the time go by" than Irish students, particularly at the eighth grade level. Factors such as the availability of reading materials and other leisure activities, the need for organized entertainment and home and school pressures, might help to explain these cultural differences in the functions of reading. These issues, however, are clearly beyond the scope of the present study.

In conclusion, the uses and gratifications approach has been a useful strategy for analyzing the dynamic relationship between children's needs and reading. It assumes that the child actively pursues certain materials on the basis of predetermined needs. Further research is required to test the validity of this assumption. In addition, it is important to note that while a child is selective, it is a selectivity which operates within a framework of environmental conditions. Restrictive

factors, including the availability of books, time and space all impinge upon the individual's active use of the media.

This study attempted to analyze the functions of reading from two cultural perspectives. An analysis of these trends cross-culturally can provide educators with a greater understanding of the universality of certain reading behaviors as well as important differences between cultures. This cooperative effort might encourage a further exchange of theoretical and practical information leading to a broader conceptualization of the overall reading process.

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Table 1

Sample Statistics

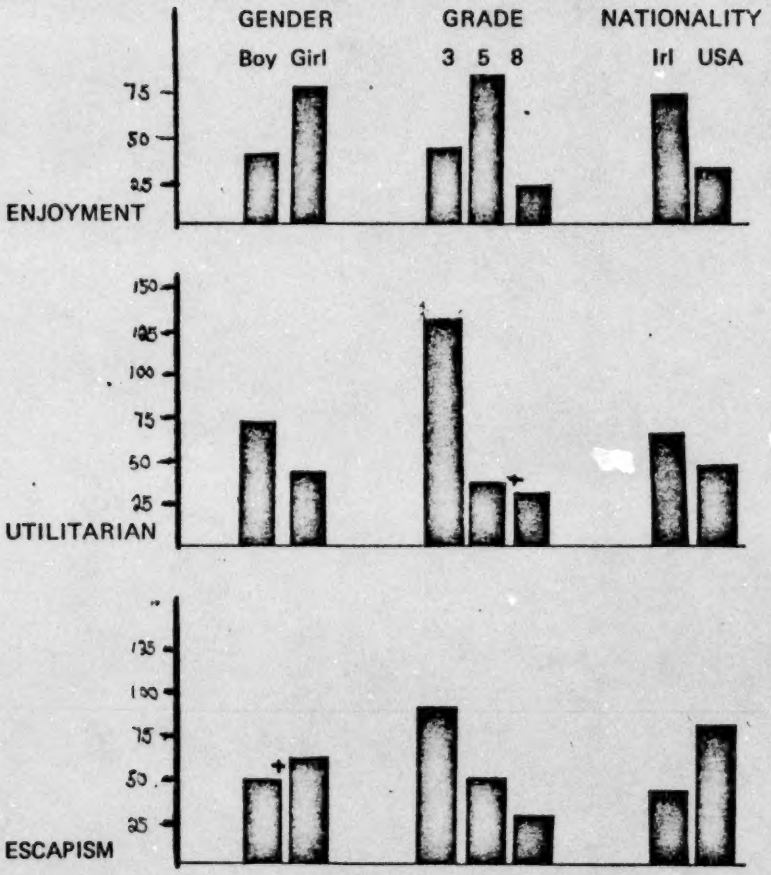
Grade Level	Ireland		United States		
	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	Total
Grade 3	35	30	37	23	125
Grade 5	63	70	27	33	193
Grade 8	56	25	31	29	141
Total	154	125	95	85	459

Table 2

The Functions of Reading
Total Sample for all Grade Levels
Principal Factor Solutions with Varimax Rotation

	Factor Loadings*		
Statements (Abbreviated)	I	II	III
Get enjoyment from reading	.78	.05	.03
It is exciting	.75	-.04	.08
It is interesting	.71	.11	.02
Books tell good stories	.65	.08	.15
Makes me have an adventure	.58	.09	.18
Puts thoughts in mind	.43	.48	.00
Makes me understand more	.41	.55	-.03
Will help with later school subjects	.09	.79	.10
Helps at school	.09	.74	.08
Helps get a job	.00	.69	.21
Parents think it's important	-.09	.66	.23
Nothing to do	-.12	.03	.68
Gets mind off things	.34	.12	.68
Makes time go by	.06	.17	.65
Helps me forget my worries	.24	.15	.61
Stops me from being bored	.17	.08	.59
Per cent of variance	19.0	17.2	14.1
Percent of total variance			50.3

Figure 1
Reasons for Reading



+ Not significant. All other mean differences are significant.